

# Close Reading<sup>1</sup>

To do a close reading of literature, you choose a specific passage from the text and analyze it in fine detail, as if with a magnifying glass. You then comment on the author's use of language and literary devices and on your reactions as a reader. Close reading is an important skill to develop because it is the building block for deeper and more sophisticated analysis. Your thoughts evolve not from someone else's truth claims about a text, but from your own observations. The more closely you can observe, the more original and exact your ideas will be.

## Part I- Annotating

To begin your close reading, choose a passage that intrigues you. Read the passage several times, underlining words and phrases that grab your attention. Then think about why you are drawn to the passage. The list of literary elements and questions below are meant to *guide* your close reading efforts, not determine or fix them in a set pattern.

### The 4 W's (Who/What/When/Where)

These questions help you establish basic information about the subject and setting of the passage.

**Point of view:** Who is speaking/ narrating? Who/what is being addressed? What point of view is the passage written from (first, second, or third person?) How does this perspective impact the way you perceive certain characters and/or actions?

**Setting/Situation:** What's happening? To whom? How does it fit into the larger story?

**Characterization:** Who/ what is being described? Does the passage reveal something new about the motivations of a character? What is the character's tone in the text? Does the passage mark a departure from a particular character's usual attitudes and actions?

**Conflict:** What is the point of tension in the passage? Does the conflict relate directly or indirectly to a larger conflict in the text? Is the conflict internal in which a character struggles with a psychological, philosophical, or moral issue? Or, is it an external conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Credit for this document goes to Molly O'Hagan Hardy and the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin and Dr. Kip Wheeler at Carson-Newman University ([http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/resource\\_literature.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/resource_literature.html)) with a few additions and modifications by me.

in which a character battles against nature, society, or another character? How does the conflict reinforce and build themes in the work as a whole?

## How

“How” questions allow you to make observations regarding language and form. This is often where the slowest, closest reading comes in.

**Diction/ Syntax:** What words or phrases stand out to you from the text? Look up the definitions of these words. Does a word have multiple meanings? If so, how does it enrich your understanding of specific themes and characters? How do important words relate to one another? Is the order of words (syntax) unexpected or unfamiliar? Why?

**Repetition, Symbols, Imagery:** Does the scene grab your attention because of the reappearance or repetition of a specific word, object, or action? Does it symbolize a character, a theme, or an idea? Why would the author choose to repeat that particular word or object? Are there colors, sounds, physical descriptions that appeal to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound, or physical description? Is it symbolic? Foreshadowing?

**Other figurative devices to consider:** allusion, alliteration, atmosphere, hyperbole, irony, juxtaposition, metaphor, mood, personification, punctuation, simile, tone, and many many more!

## Why

These questions invite you to consider how your answers to the 4 “W” questions and the “how” questions interact. In other words, consider why the author writes the passage the way s/he does.

**Contradictions:** Do any contradictions emerge in a character’s behavior or within the plot of the text? Are there indicators that suggest we should read against the overt meaning of the passage?

**Discerning Patterns:** Does an image/word here remind you of an image/word elsewhere in the story or poem? How does this pattern fit into the text as a whole? How could this passage symbolize something in the entire work?

**Double meanings/ Ambiguities:** Does the author’s use of language complicate your understanding of a character or incident? What appears to be left out or silenced? What could the author have done differently--*and* what is the effect of the current choice?

## Part II- Writing

When you arrive at some answers to these and other questions, you are ready to organize and write. An **effective close reading paragraph** should combine three different skills: (1) **contextualization**, (2) **analysis**, and (3) **invention**. Again, the following steps are not a formula for your writing, but a starting point for organizing your ideas.

### Context

Offer a brief contextualization of the passage. Include relevant details about who is speaking, what is happening, where the passage occurs in relation to the overall story or poem. This contextualization is meant to position the reader so that he or she has a basic understanding of the material you will be analyzing.

### Analysis

Rely on your answers to the above questions to provide a detailed examination of the passage. For example, discuss how the author's use of language and literary devices impacts our perception of a particular character or chain of events. This analysis is ideally where your slowest and closest reading of the text comes in. Your goal is to demonstrate the significance of specific details from the passage and the insights they provide.

### Invention

Use your analysis to develop an interpretation of the larger meaning and motive behind the passage. Consider these questions: Why is it important for the reader to know what you have just analyzed and explained? How does the passage you have chosen help us understand the story, poem, or play more effectively? As the term invention implies, this is your opportunity to show off your original ideas and perspectives on the reading so don't be afraid to take risks!